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Review of *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*. Alice Goffman. Reviewed by Jennifer Zelnick

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Book Reviews

Alice Goffman, *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*. University of Chicago Press (2014). 288 pages, \$25.00 (hardcover).

Alice Goffman's *On the Run* is a birds-eye view of the legacy of so-called "tough on crime" policies associated with the war on drugs on a poor, African American Philadelphia community. Goffman adopts the viewpoints of the community residents and notes her hope that "these perspectives will come to matter in the debate about criminal justice policy that now seems to be brewing" (p. xiv). They should. The strength of Goffman's book is her fair, unsentimental, and non-ideological portrayal of the lives of her research subjects that serves to humanize them while emphasizing the dehumanizing tendencies of criminal justice policies.

Through a somewhat unlikely series of events (I am surely not the only reader whose need to understand the terms of Goffman's access caused them to skip ahead to the very interesting methods section at book's end), Goffman spent nearly 6 years, some during her undergraduate and graduate studies, living in an area in Philadelphia that she calls "6th Street" as a participant observer among a group of young African American men and their families. She witnessed phenomena, such as police raids, that are rarely described from the point of view of those "on the run." The book is based on continuous field notes, some typed or recorded on her phone, and often presents actual exchanges and dialogue.

Along with one of the book's chief protagonists, she conducted a survey of neighborhood households in 2007, finding that 144 of 308 men between the ages of 18-30 had a warrant issued for arrest because of delinquent court fines, fees, or failure to appear for a court date in the last 3 years, and 119 reported warrants for technical violations of their probation or parole (such as drinking or missing curfew). Goffman notes that these bench warrants (as opposed to "body" warrants that are issued for new criminal cases) comprise the vast

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majority of legal entanglements. Along with police quotas, new technologies to track violations, and increased numbers of “warrant units,” a structure of surveillance has been created that produces outcome data that show the “success” of criminal justice policy while deeply affecting the lives of those who are fugitives from this sort of tracking.

Goffman’s book is devoted to expanding themes (generally divided into separate chapters) related to the impact of surveillance on individuals, their relationships, and the community. For example, Chapter 1, “The Art of Running” describes how “everyday relations, localities, activities that others rely on for their basic needs become a net of entrapment” (p. 52). Here Goffman refers to how having a job, a known address (or that of a girlfriend) become resources for surveillance. Additionally, there are more nuanced implications—e.g., if someone is known to be avoiding the authorities s/he becomes “easy prey” since she or he is unlikely to report a crime. Chapter 2, “When the Police Knock Your Door In” describes the complex relations between men and women that result from the (often conflicting) tendencies to be loyal while also protecting children: the descriptions of how women turn from “rider” (the term used for those who protect their man) and “snitch” are particularly devastating. Chapter 3, “Turning Legal Troubles into Personal Resources” explains how people adapt to the dynamics of surveillance to use them to their own advantage. For example, women may use the “go to jail card” as a way to control men’s behavior, or men may turn themselves in and take a break in jail if they perceive that the streets have become too dangerous.

The final chapter, “Clean People” contrasts the lives of the 6th Street men with other African American men of the same age who work security and similar low wage service jobs, largely avoiding the traps of 6th Street. Towards the end of Goffman’s narrative another main character, a grandmother employed at the University of Pennsylvania cafeteria who initially introduced Goffman to 6th Street, is laid off just before reaching retirement and earning her pension. These references to the traps faced by “clean” people are both a contrast to the fugitive life described in the rest of the book and a reference to the labor market that shapes the prospects of the 6th Street community.

Though a sociology book, it is entirely jargon free and

employs very scant theory. The descriptions of the policy context and brief history of Philadelphia were enriching, and I found myself wanting more. Because of the thematic organization, the narrative of events and personal details are often repetitive; better editing would have helped. Still, the conclusions drawn by Goffman truly come from a grounded theory, and it never feels like she is stretching to make her well-supported points. Missing are methods details of how interviews were conducted with police and others who are not the primary research subjects, making the book feel less academic. This will be distracting for qualitative researchers. These are minor complaints given the contributions of the book.

This book will be valuable for policy, ethnography, and social work students in academic settings or for personal enrichment (it's hard to put it down). It fills gaps that are invisible in policy analyses and programs addressed to "rescue" young black men, and it provides a counterpoint to well-meant programs and evidence-based interventions that are often not validated in urban communities, perhaps even working at cross purposes to their stated goals. Towards the end of the book, Goffman explains that despite the police brutality she has witnessed, she doesn't blame individual police officers but instead the policy structures that play out in communities like 6th Street. This book is unusual, moving, and effective and targeted at criminal justice policy changes that are sorely needed.

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Nathalie Morel, Bruno Palier, and Joakim Palme, Eds., *Towards a Social Investment Welfare State? Ideas, Policies, and Challenges*. Policy Press (2012). \$100 (hardcover).

This edited volume with contributions by distinguished European and North American social scientists makes the case for a third stage of the welfare state that is neither the post-World War II Keynesian version committed to sustaining demand and compensating the casualties of the market economy nor the neo-liberal iteration that regarded social welfare as a cost and emphasized activation. The social investment welfare state is committed to "preparing"—instead